

Washington, D.C. – Today, Congressman Jim Costa (D-Fresno) sharply criticized the Department of the Army’s treatment of a burial waiver request for Hmong General Vang Pao to be interred at Arlington National Cemetery in a letter addressed to Secretary of Defense Robert Gates. Secretary of the Army John McHugh issued a rejection of the burial waiver on February 4, 2011, the first day of the Hmong General’s well-attended funeral.

“Since the Army was made aware of the funeral, the timing of the announcement showed both unacceptable disorganization and a callous insensitivity to the General’s family and the tens of thousands of funeral attendees,” Costa wrote to Secretary Gates.

Costa also reiterated his deep disappointment in the Army’s rejection of the burial waiver, which was requested by the family and supporters of General Vang Pao.

“In 1981, General Vang Pao set an example to his fellow countrymen by becoming an American citizen in the adopted country he loved. Without a doubt he deserved to be buried alongside the same men with whom he fought shoulder to shoulder, American soldiers,” Costa wrote.

The Administration has yet to respond to a February 8, 2011, request by Costa and three other members of the House of Representatives to overturn Secretary McHugh’s decision.

The text of the letter is laid out below:

February 16, 2011

The Honorable Robert Gates

Secretary of Defense

1300 Defense Pentagon

Washington, DC 20301

Dear Secretary Gates:

This letter serves to express my disappointment in the manner that your department handled my recent request for a burial waiver for Major General Vang Pao in Arlington National Cemetery. As you well know, General Vang Pao led the Royal Lao Army during the secret war in Laos, fighting against the People's Army of Vietnam in cooperation with the CIA and US military forces. Commanding tens of thousands of Hmong men and women, Vang Pao conducted direct missions against communist forces. In 1981, General Vang Pao set an example to his fellow countrymen by becoming an American citizen in the adopted country he loved. Without a doubt he deserved to be buried alongside the same men with whom he fought shoulder to shoulder, American soldiers.

Beyond the principal rejection of the overall request, I was also disappointed that your department chose to release the Army's denial decision just as the General's elaborate funeral began in Fresno California. Since the Army was made aware of the funeral, the timing of the announcement showed both unacceptable disorganization and a callous insensitivity to the General's family and the tens of thousands of funeral attendees.

Lastly, Secretary Gates, I'd like to express my dissatisfaction with the level of communication that my office and I received during the waiver request process. Calls to your Department and the Secretary of the Army's office went unreturned and officials were not forthcoming with information about the waiver process and procedure.

It is my hope to continue working with your department in a productive manner to address the many needs of California's San Joaquin Valley. Unfortunately the Hmong people and I were let down by both the underlying decision in this matter, and in the way this process was handled. Thank you very much for your time and we look forward to hearing from you regarding this matter.

Sincerely,

/s/

JIM COSTA

Member of Congress